

Asbestos victim is Martz's guest at speech

Libby man had been critical of governor's EPA stance

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HELENA — Les Skramstad of Libby may seem an unlikely person to get special attention in Republican Gov. Judy Marts's statewide speech Wednesday.

For one thing, Skramstad is a Democrat. For another, he's an asbestos victim who was critical of

the governor during her months of reluctance to support a proposal to use the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program for cleanup of his town's toxic problems. But Marts has since changed her mind about the issue, asking the EPA to make Libby its top Superfund priority in Montana, and she's invited

Skramstad to the Capitol for her address Wednesday.

He says he'll be there, but he's a bit surprised by the whole thing.

"I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that I'd be invited to a governor's wedding," Skramstad said Monday. "But I'm not going to get puffed up about this. I hope this isn't a ploy to use me. If it is, I'll be

really upset."

Mary Schwarz, communications director for the governor, said Marts will give special recognition to Skramstad during her speech.

Skramstad has been a key victims' advocate in Libby for those who have been sickened or died from exposure to asbestos, released into Libby's environment with decades of vermiculite mining.

The governor's upcoming speech is itself unusual. It's believed to be the first time a Montana governor

will deliver a State of the State address when the Legislature is not in session. Marts will follow another precedent she set last year, becoming the first Montana governor to use a TelePrompTer to deliver the address. Last year, it cost the governor's office \$3,400 to rent and install the equipment.

The governor will speak from the state House chambers and her message will be broadcast live by PBS.

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some radio stations, including the Northern Broadcasting Service and public radio stations. A television network has also

agreed to carry the speech live and negotiations are ongoing with other stations, Schwarz said.

All 150 legislators have been invited to the 7:30 p.m. address, but will have to travel to Helena at their own expense because the speech is not an official state

function, Schwarz said. Skramstad also will go to Helena at his own cost. Statewide-elected officials, including justices of the Montana Supreme Court and appointees like the state Board of Regents, also are on the guest list.

Schwarz said she was uncertain how big the audience would be or what the event would cost. Typically, a governor gives the State of the State address to a joint session of the Montana House and Senate during every other year when

the Legislature already is meeting or called into special session.

Schwarz said Marts is breaking tradition because she wants to get out her own message. The governor has had a rough first year in office and

often has criticized press reports of her administration.

"It's the end of her first year in office and she wants to have the opportunity to tell the people of Montana what she's done and what we're going to do," Schwarz added.